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Ruth and De-valuation of the values of Victorian Period

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ABSTRACT. The novel *Ruth* by Elizabeth Gaskell is a novel which deconstructs the values of the Victorian society. In fact this novel devalues the values of this period by bucking the system of Victorian norms and values. This is manifested in the change of Ruth from a naïve to mature girl through her fall. In fact her fall makes her wise. When she dies she is given a funeral which is given to a virtuous woman. Her funeral is a slap on the face of the Victorian ideals of goodness and badness. This tells us that the values should be revised when such a person is not that much bad while she is considered bad. Gaskell devalues the values of Victorian society through her heroine's migration and her living under a false name to teach us a lesson as to how shaky the Victorian ideas are and should be checked again. In fact, this novel has contributed, though little, to the way a woman like Ruth should be viewed.

1. INTRODUCTION

The story of Ruth is the story of many. These many are those who did not have anybody to rely on. They were rejected by harsh principles of society. Those harsh principles decided the lives of many. Women were simply eliminated from the face of society because they could not live up to the harsh principles of patriarchy. Many resisted by traveling to other regions anonymously. This used another name to get around those harsh principles of patriarchy. Their migration and bearing a false name were slap on the face of this patriarchy and its rules and regulations. Ruth is one such person. She is cheated a rake member of patriarchy and then left alone on her own. She gives life to a child and lives under another name.

She is nearly saved by the Bensons but her true identity is found out and she has to leave. She helps the poor and lives with the poor and again works on her character to make it perfect. Ruth becomes a wise woman and little by little comes to be a great woman. She improves her character to a point when there is a man dying from an infectious disease and no one is to care about him but she goes to nurse her and catches the disease and dies.

When Ruth dies Mr. Benson is sad and gives a funeral speech in her honour "His voice trembled as he read and prayed. But he steadied it as he opened his sermon—his great, last effort in her honour—the labour that he had prayed God to bless to the hearts of many"(Gaskell, 326). Mr Benson is all in tears, and his description is sensational:

For an instant the old man looked on all the upturned faces, listening, with wet eyes, to hear what he could say to interpret that which was in their hearts, dumb and unshaped, of God's doings as shown in her life. He looked, and, as he gazed, a mist came before him, and he could not see his sermon, nor his hearers, but only Ruth, as she had been—stricken low, and crouching from sight, in the upland field by Llandhu—like a woeful, hunted creature.(ibid, 326)

This description of the dissident priest challenges the values of Victorian values and in fact wants the readers to see how shaky those values are. In one place Ruth is considered a bad woman while in another place she is a good character. Mr. Benson's makes everyone in shed tears at the end of Ruth's life:

And now her life was over! her struggle ended! Sermon and all was forgotten. He sat down, and hid his face in his hands for a minute or so. Then he arose, pale and serene. He put the sermon away, and opened the Bible, and read the seventh chapter of Revelations, beginning at the ninth verse. Before it was finished, most of his hearers were in tears. (ibid, 326)

The decent funeral given to her is a slap on the face of the Victorian outlook towards the fallen women. People, like kind and nice Mr. Benson, are there to tell us that we can help these fallen women to be accepted in society and they will be penitent at the end. These people honor her and respect her to the point that she corrected herself. Gaskell also foregrounds the loss of Ruth when her son Leonardo is emotionally crying over her body and calling her a lot of times:

"Mother! mother! mother! You have not left me alone! You will not leave me alone! You are not dead! Mother! Mother!"

They had pent in his agony of apprehension till then, that no wail of her child might disturb her ineffable calm. But now there was a cry heard through the house, of one refusing to be comforted:

"Mother! Mother!" (ibid, 320).

This description along with other descriptions of death of Ruth and reactions of her son and many others reduces the readers to tears too. Bronte says "why should she die? Why are we to shut up the book weeping? My heart fails me already at the thought of the pang it will have to undergo" (quoted by Forster, 105)

Victorian society has it that if any woman did not live up to its standards, she is labeled as fallen and mad woman and such is the case with Ruth. She is called a naughty woman in the novel by a boy. When she did not observe those rules laid by the social authorities, she is not respected and is labeled as disrespectful. But the novel does not act to that effect and creates a martyr out of Ruth by telling us that she is not that much bad.

Gaskell deconstructs the Victorian society's notion of fallen woman and angel in the house. She says overtly that it is the Victorian society itself that is responsible for the fall of Ruth and works to the benefit of people like Bellingham. She is deconstructing the binary opposition of Angel in the house versus fallen woman. This is not to say that it is simple a reversible binary opposition. She problematizes the situation in the life of Ruth and teaches her readers that it is possible to look at the situation otherwise. She makes everyone of us responsible as members of society. If society does not care for others that society will have to pay huge price.

Shirly Foster in investigating the life and work of Elizabeth Gaskell and her *Ruth* says that "Men as betrayers and victimizers of women, family bonds as a curse rather than a blessing, the anarchically liberating – but also destructive – power of sexual desire are only some of the charged or contentious issues explored in the stories" (79).

Gaskell was persuaded that the bias and injustices surrounding the subject of the fallen woman must be brought to communal consideration; although she understood she was walking a hazardous path, she repudiated to "hide [my] head like an ostrich and try by doing so to forget that the evil exists" (quoted by Forster, 101). To put a veil on the corruption in the society is more immoral. Forster also refers to another of Gaskell's long letters of late January 1853, the month of *Ruth*'s publication, to her sister-in-law, Anne Robson, in which she clarifies how much she fears the great pain and distress which annoyed responses to the novel will cause her; nonetheless, she says, in spite of knowing that her theme will be called " '[a]n unfit subject for fiction' ... I determined notwithstanding to speak my mind out about it ... I wd do every jot of it over again tomorrow". (ibid,)

Gaskell deals with the quarrelsome matter of Ruth's moral features; on the one hand talking about her innocence and simplicity which make her very idealistic and weak, and on the other hand making her ethical by placing emphasis on her sense of guilt, repentance, and her desire for improvement. She, at last, disobeys Mr. Bellingham, repudiating his money and proposal of marriage, and pointing to the role he has played in her ruin:

I do not love you. I did once. Don't say I did not love you then; but I do not now. I could never love you again. All you have said and done since you came with Mr Bradshaw to Abermouth first, has only made me wonder how I ever could have loved you. We are very far apart. The time that has pressed down my life like brands of hot iron, and scarred me forever, has been nothing to you. You have talked of it with no sound of moaning in your voice—no shadow over the brightness of your face; it has left no sense of sin on your conscience, while me it haunts and haunts; and yet I might plead that I was an ignorant child—only I will not plead anything, for God knows all— But this is only one piece of our great difference. (Gaskell, 249)

Gaskell is not like other writers who talk about fallen women. Ruth, in contrast to many earlier fallen heroines, neither has a life of misery, nor loses her child. Instead of being an oppressed victim, she is primarily in love with Bellingham and appreciates his company; as a mother loving her illegitimate child, she can attain ethical redemption. (Forster, 104). Foster also believes that Ruth is characterized as a type of romantic character, linked with flowers and nature. From the very outset she is singled out from the other needlewomen at Mrs. Mason's by her delicate reaction to the natural atmosphere – here, the snow on the town edifices; later, in Snowdonia, when she looks at the wonderful backdrop. With the water lilies located by Bellingham in her chestnut hair, she appears to be an image of virginal purity, and undeniably evokes the images of sanctified womanhood in some Pre-Raphaelite paintings (ibid).

2. MODIFICATION OF VICTORIAN NORMS

Matus contends that Gaskell intends to modify society's outlooks concerning "fallen women" at home in *Ruth*, and nevertheless she stimulated emigration for an authentic seduced woman as her only optimism of redemption.(8) This is true from the story too that can be regarded as a moral story teaching readers of her time to watch out against the evils.

Victorians generally supposed that if a lady fell into sexual wrongdoing, the next rational stage would be whoredom (Barnhill, 19). This is because when she does it for the first time, the man who takes away her virginity leaves her alone and no other man is ever going to marry such a person. As thought and believed by many middle-class Victorians "sexual lapse and sexual sale" were not different and they were considered equal. (ibid, 11). A lady who was ethically contaminated was not only defamed, she was regarded an infection and disconnected from well-thought-of civilization. J. B. Talbot, a conspicuous Victorian Christian forerunner, emphasized that every fallen lady distributes with contamination "the most frightful contagion and immorality" (ibid 12). Through the character of Ruth, Elizabeth Gaskell questions the shared Victorian concept that the prostitute was the font of disease, moral contamination and ruin. By making Ruth a great person and a sacred woman at the end of the novel Gaskell challenges the idea that women were the basis and fountain of corruption.

The spirit of Gaskell's criticism of Victorian social standards lies in the fact that Ruth is not responsible for her corruption. In fact she did not have the least idea of corruption. This is demonstrated when she is told by old Old Thomas "My dear, remember the devil goes about as a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour; remember that, Ruth." (Gaskell, 49). Gaskell comments on the above sentence and quite in defense of the innocent Ruth:

The words fell on her ear, but gave no definite idea. The utmost they suggested was the remembrance of the dread she felt as a child when this verse came into her mind, and how she used to imagine a lion's head with glaring eyes peering out of the bushes in a dark shady part of the wood, which, for this reason, she had always avoided, and even now could hardly think of without a shudder. She never imagined that the grim warning related to the handsome young man who awaited her with a countenance beaming with love, and tenderly drew her hand within his arm. (ibid, 49)

Ruth is also ‘innocent and snow-pure’ (ibid, 44) in fact, Ruth cannot distinguish the right from the wrong and is thus labeled as a sinner. Besides, she herself confesses to the fact of her being a young innocent girl:

I was very young; I did not know how such a life was against God's pure and holy will—at least, not as I know it now; and I tell you truth—all the days of my years since I have gone about with a stain on my hidden soul—a stain which made me loathe myself, and envy those who stood spotless and undefiled; which made me shrink from my child—from Mr. Benson, from his sister, from the innocent girls whom I teach—nay, even I have cowered away from God Himself; and what I did wrong then, I did blindly to what I should do now if I listened to you."(ibid, 246)

To be young and naïve makes her to be a fallen woman. This is, in fact, how Gaskell tries to correct the views of the Victorian society. But the Victorian readers did not accept what Gaskell said about Ruth. Many of them burned the copies of the book. These readers protested against it due to religious reasons. Bishops burnt their copies of *Ruth*, protesting against the immorality of Gaskell's sympathetic narration of a “fallen woman.” And a small but strong-minded group of commentators strongly criticized her at numerous points in her vocation for the irresponsibility with which she has had on a subject which she has so distorted, whether it be the circumstance of the working classes or the causes of “the great social evil,” whoredom.(Matus, 10).

3. RUTH IS CRITICAL OF THE SOCIETY.

It is crystal clear that the novel can be a great praise of Ruth. To praise her, Gaskell is critical of society which brought about her fall. Gaskell is also placing emphasis on the women as innocent and weak and this weakness is innately in them. The novel implicitly says that the only way not to be weak on the part of women is to educate themselves and it is the patriarchal society which does not let women educate themselves and they are victims of social norms and circumstances. To correct the society and the outlook of the people, a writer is a responsible member of society that should help raise the consciousness and awareness of the people. The fact that the subject of fallen women does not appeal to modern readers any longer is because this topic is no longer a concern and a problem of the modern British people who consider it as awkward, but this is because of the efforts of writers like Gaskell that the attitude towards fallen women has changed and their rights are recognized in modern times. It is because of the efforts of such writers who deconstructed the western wrong social norms in their novels to bring about a change. Comanchette Rene McBee believes Gaskell wished Victorians to be alert and look around them, to see what was really occurring, and she also desired them to talk about these subjects. Every one of her chief works was intended to make readers contemplate or act in a different way (14).

As said earlier Gaskell is deconstructing the notion of angel and fallen woman. She puts great characteristics and features to Ruth who is a fallen woman. Gaskell makes her a kind mother, a nice nurse, and a caring governess. These features were what actually required of a woman in the Victorian society to be submissive and docile. Many of the features of a mother are found in her. Gaskell is reversing the binary opposition of angel in the house and the fallen woman. In fact, the description of Ruth is like the description of an angel with the difference that she lacks home and family.

Considering Ruth as a caring mother and many other good and positive qualities she has, Gaskell makes use of emigration and changes the name of Ruth to Denbigh in the novel to deconstruct the notion of evil and good. Because Gaskell believes Ruth is an innocent girl and she did not do anything wrong, she makes her pure once again by letting her go to another place under another name. This tells us how influential and important is the notion of good and evil. The one who is considered evil in one place is considered a pure, innocent, and nice woman in another place and Gaskell is further deconstructing the notion of names in the novel when she changes the name of Ruth to Denbigh. Names after all are socially created and this tells us there is no fixed distinction between the signified and the signifier and the signifier Ruth does not yield any longer the signified

Ruth, the person with those characteristics of the physical Ruth. Gaskell nicely tells us that the people are good and goodness and badness has nothing to do with the names of the people but with the nature of that person and it seems Gaskell is successful in deconstructing the concept of angel and evil.

To defend Ruth again Gaskell places Ruth in the hands of Mr. Benson who is a good priest and very helpful. He is behind the changing of the name of Ruth to Denbigh and making her live happily for some time. This will make readers contemplate over the situation of people like Ruth. She wants people to change their way of thinking about women like Ruth. This finds expression in the following passage;

Is it not time to change some of our ways of thinking and acting? I declare before God, that if I believe in any one human truth, it is this—that to every woman who, like Ruth, has sinned, should be given a chance of self-redemption—and that such a chance should be given in no supercilious or contemptuous manner, but in the spirit of the holy Christ. (Gaskell. 288)

To win her cause Gaskell cleverly deconstructs the situation as said above that perhaps the people we are living with have false names and have done something wrong and are living happily with us without harming us. If people like Ruth, who are not intentional wrongdoers, are accepted in the society, it will help them improve themselves. It is God who is the real judge and we have to remember that if anybody in her situation might have acted as she did after all. Gaskell wants us to respect people like Ruth as creatures of God. This is what she preaches under the character of Mr. Benson who seems to be Gaskell herself:

it is God's will that we should not dare to trample any of His creatures down to the hopeless dust; that it is God's will that the women who have fallen should be numbered among those who have broken hearts to be bound up, not cast aside as lost beyond recall. If this be God's will, as a thing of God it will stand; and He will open a way. (ibid, 249)

Langridge believes motivation for the novel sprang from Gaskell first-hand experience aiding a young prostitute named Pasley, of whom she wrote: “she looks quite a young child (she is but 16) with a wild wistful look in her eyes, as if searching for the kindness she has never known, - and she pines to redeem herself”(quoted by Langridge, 49).

4. CONCLUSION

The novel transvaluates the values of the Victorian norms. This is what the novel does through migration and bearing a false name. Indeed migrating to another region under a false name could be a good way to get around harsh principles of society and that is why people migrate to other countries in order to live better lives. The novel presents migration as a panacea because no longer will there be any obstacle to a good life. In fact bearing another name is also helpful when in the region in which a woman like Ruth lives you are no longer accepted as a member. Ruth loves life and wants to prove that she is not a guilty person and wants to make a difference. In fact many fallen women committed suicide when their secret was exposed. But Ruth resists and brings a change to her life. The values are to be changed when they are shaky and unfair. The novel deconstructs the harsh values and gets around them by making Ruth have another name and by letting her migrate to another region and live a good and respectable life.

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